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\$100/Day Vacation in Boot Camp

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By Carl Schreck / The Moscow Times

YAROSLAVL -- With hazing and frequent noncombat deaths, serving in the army is no vacation. But one enterprising veteran is banking on a thirst among Russians and foreigners alike to experience the life of a young recruit -- and he is willing to include hazing at no extra cost.

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Andrei Palachyov, a 35-year-old veteran of the first Chechen war, is offering a vacation package called Army-Tour in a boot camp on the outskirts of Yaroslavl, a city of 700,000 people located 265 kilometers northeast of Moscow.

"There are a lot of foreigners who have so much money that they don't know what to do with it," Palachyov said. "They go to Turkey or Egypt, and it's all the same. If they want extreme, we'll give them extreme -- Russian style."

For \$100 per day, tourists can learn to march and fight, tackle an obstacle course, assemble a Kalashnikov, crawl through the mud under ominously low barbwire and receive various forms of punishment from a group of veterans and military officers who oversee the training. Participants can order as many days as they can bear at the Desantnik, or Paratrooper, camp.

On Friday, 17 people -- many of whom appeared to be special guests of Palachyov's and a little too familiar with the drills to be first-timers -- tested their mettle in a one-day program at the camp.

The day kicked off at about 11:00 a.m., with would-be recruits standing at attention as the Russian flag was raised while the national anthem blared from the stereo of a nearby Lada.

Palachyov, in a voice oddly high and nasal given his short, beefy physique, gave a short speech wishing them luck. That was followed by a lesson on how to stand at attention, a three-minute smoking break, and a lesson on how to take apart and reassemble a Kalashnikov.



Vladimir Filonov / MT
Alexei Makhov crawling through a muddy pit and under barbed wire during a lesson at the tourist camp in Yaroslavl.

When a few recruits' eyes began to wander, instructor Vadim Baranov, a 28-year-old contract soldier who has served two tours in Chechnya, ordered the group to the ground for push-ups.

"If you're not going to pay attention, you're going to be punished," Baranov, wearing a green beret and a blue- and white-striped tank top, barked at them.

Another smoking break followed the Kalashnikov lesson, arguably a less than optimal warm-up for the obstacle course that followed.

Indeed, some of the participants proved to be ill-prepared for the obstacle course, which included plunging into a pond to cross into open fields surrounding the camp. After everyone had made the swim, a pack of Marlboro Reds cigarettes was left behind floating in the stagnant water. One participant tried in vain to dry out his soggy smokes.

The most difficult exercise came next. The group was ordered to crawl three meters headfirst through a muddy pit and under a net of rusty barbed wire.

One participant caught his leg on the barbed wire as he dove into the pit and was ordered to crawl back out.

"This soldier is now dead!" the instructor yelled, ordering a second soldier to put him on his back and carry him off the battlefield.

After the trek through the mud, the participants headed back to Army-Tour headquarters to clean up and wait for a battlefield lunch of fish soup and buckwheat porridge with canned beef and tea.

Standing around smoking and waiting for lunch, participant Alexei Makhov, 30, said he did not know anyone else from the group and that he just wanted to test his skills 10 years after finishing his army service.

"Crawling in the mud was not so much fun, but the rest was great," he said.

He said the activities were about 80 percent the same as a real boot camp. "The main difference here is that you can leave at the end of the day," he said.

Makhov said he was a taxi driver and that he heard about Army-Tour from passengers he had brought to the camp. Like the other participants, he declined to say how much he had paid for the day, although he nodded sheepishly when asked if it was less than \$100. "It's a secret," he said.

Ilya Galkin, 23, said he was a computer and cell phone salesman in Yaroslavl and had served two years in Moscow with an Army transportation unit. He said he found out about Army-Tour through the Internet and wanted to try his hand at extreme tourism.

But he has no hankering to return to the army. "I just wanted to try it out," he said. "Why would I want to go back to the army?"

Business has not exactly been booming since Palachyov dreamed up the idea of the boot camp three years ago as a means to support a Yaroslavl-based organization of Chechnya and Afghanistan war veterans called Zashchitnik, or Defender. The organization, which he heads, runs a veterans' assistance fund and a youth military club called Desantnik and offers security services to local businessmen, shops and factories.

Since the tour began operating last fall, only five groups have signed up, Palachyov said. The largest was a group of about 30 Moscow students who spent two days at the camp last September.

"Russians are an enigmatic people," Palachyov said. "After the two days, about half of the students said, 'One thing is for sure: I'll never go in the Army.' The other half said they were ready to join up."

Palachyov, a native of the Yaroslavl region who served 11 years in an OMON unit from Vladivostok, fought in Chechnya in 1995-96 and left the army in 1999 due to a series of injuries, some sustained during his tour in Chechnya.

A tattoo on his left arm dedicated to his Chechnya tour says in English, "Soldier of Fortune." In Russian, beneath a skull mounted on a Russian flag, it says: "Trust in God but rely on yourself."

Palachyov spoke longingly of the prospect of foreign tourists and said a group of Spaniards had expressed interest and could arrive as early as August. In addition to foreigners, Palachyov believes Army-Tour could fill a niche in the Russian tourist market by attracting former servicemen nostalgic for their Army days, people who never served and die-hard patriots.

But he said he has had difficulty convincing Russian tourist agencies to promote Army-Tour.

"Most of the people in the agencies grew up in crappy conditions, so for them this is nothing new," he said.

Palachyov said some tourist agencies complained that foreigners require more comfortable living conditions than Army-Tour could provide -- bathing facilities, for one. "I told them if they want to bathe, they can go to Sochi instead," he said. "If they want to bathe here, they can use the pond. If they want to go to the bathroom, by all means -- the woods are right there."

On top of the potential financial windfall the vacation package could provide to his organization, Palachyov eagerly spoke of using it to build patriotism and put a positive spin on the much-criticized Army.

A growing number of recruits are committing suicide or dying of injuries inflicted by hazing, according to a report released by Human Rights Watch late last year. The degrading treatment of first-year conscripts by their seniors is so prevalent that it is "clearly undermining" the military's effectiveness and is one of the country's biggest human rights problems, the report said.

It called on President Vladimir Putin to combat widespread abuses known as dedovshchina, or the "rule of grandfathers," the nickname given to second-year conscripts.

Chief military prosecutor Alexander Savenkov told reporters last month that crime and death rates

were soaring in the military, prompting Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov to insist that deaths and hazings had gone down this year. Under growing pressure from the Military Prosecutor's Office, however, Ivanov announced last week that "all information about all military deaths" would be started to be published regularly on his ministry's web site.

Palachyov said that the Army was getting a bad rap in the media and the coverage was hurting Russia's ability to defend itself. He hopes Army-Tour can help combat that image, if only to a small degree. "In Israel, you see young women champing at the bit to defend their borders," he said. "You don't see that in Russia, and to tell the truth, it's insulting to Russia."

Authenticity is a key concept in Palachyov's vision of Army-Tour. One camp instructor, Lieutenant Colonel Sergei Vorontsov, 42, a career officer in military intelligence, said that time constraints in the one-day session forced many of the lessons to be shorter than in the Army but that the schedule differed little from actual basic training. "I give the exact lesson here that I give to real soldiers," said Vorontsov, who taught participants how to stand at attention.

Other activities in a typical day at the camp include hand-to-hand combat practice, anti-terrorism exercises, cleaning up the base and watching the 9 p.m. edition of the "Vremya" news program on state-run Channel One television, an Army requirement for all soldiers. "Our soldiers should know what news is going on in the country," Vorontsov said.

One gaping hole in the program's authenticity is a lack of overnight facilities. So far, groups have been housed in local hotels or rented rooms, though Palachyov hopes to one day build a tent camp near the Desantnik headquarters.

For those interested in truly extreme tourism, instructors said they would offer hazing free of charge to anyone who thinks they can take it.

Baranov acknowledged that dedovshchina exists and said it was a more effective way to control servicemen than to have officers punish them for every infraction.

He said his ded once made him do 368 push-ups for oversleeping.

"It is mostly punishment through physical exercises, but sometimes there's some of this," Baranov said, punching his palm lightly with a fist.

He said hazing at Army-Tour could include push-ups, taking apart and reassembling a bed, or even a beating. "If they really want it, we can give it to them," he said.